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ABSTRACT

The parent-teacher conference is a valuable strategy to improve a student's performance. This news brief offers suggestions for developing a "parent friendly" handbook to help parents effectively prepare for teacher-parent conferences. The handbook should include the basic information, a statement that emphasizes the importance of the conference, and suggestions for important questions that parents should ask. Topics that parents should discuss with teachers include teaching practices and instructional strategies, information about the student's home life, standardized testing, the student's permanent record, academic progress and the curriculum, counseling and medical services, and administrative policies. The handbook should also prompt parents to visit the classroom, volunteer for school activities, and meet with counselors and other administrators. Most important, the handbook should warn parents against waiting until there is a problem to contact school staff. A well-thought-out handbook will help prepare parents and ensure that the conferences are successful. (LMI)

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Tips for Principals

March 1996

from nassp

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Tips for Principals

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March 1996

How To Improve Parent-Teacher Conferences: A Guide for Parents from the Principal

The parent-teacher conference is an extremely valuable strategy to improve a student's performance. Because the family is so critical to a student's success (AASA, 1988), the parent-teacher conference is perhaps the best way for parents and teachers to get to know each other and share information that may help the student increase the quality of his or her academic performance (Smith and Piele, 1989).

Unfortunately, many parents do not or cannot meet with teachers; nearly two-thirds of parents never speak with a teacher by phone. Although 95 percent of teachers report that they communicate with parents concerning their students, most parents report that they do not become involved in long, deep, detailed, or frequent communications with their child's teacher (AASA, 1988).

Since research has consistently shown that parental involvement is needed to improve a child's education, it is important that the principal be actively involved in parent-teacher conferences. It is equally important that the principal, parents, staff, and teachers work together to make each conference a success.

Since most parents arrive at parent-teacher conferences unprepared and without specific questions, what could be a valuable experience too often becomes a wasted opportunity. An effective way to make the most of the meeting is for the principal to develop a "parent friendly" handbook to help parents create a useful and informative experience. Teachers and staff already have appropriate materials, including inservice, on how to conduct a parent conference, and a student's welfare requires that his or her parents be equally well prepared.

The handbook should include the basic information (school address, class times, teachers' names and telephone numbers, holidays, etc.), a statement that emphasizes the importance of the conference, and suggestions for some important questions that the parent should ask. Teachers and administrators should have copies so they will know what to expect from the parents.

Most schools schedule times for parent-teacher conferences, but the principal should encourage parents to visit the school frequently and meet with all staff members who are involved with their student. Much of the time this means that the principal will probably have to "go the extra mile" via telephone calls, media assistance, newsletters, student programs, and other incentives to encourage reluctant parents to attend.

The handbook should encourage parents to visit the classroom to observe the teacher and the student "in action," volunteer during the school day or for after-school activities, join a parent group or booster club, or volunteer to chaperone for at least one student function every year. This will help get parents more involved with the school and increase the level of comfort they feel with the staff.

The handbook should encourage parents to meet with counselors and administrators as well as with their student's teachers.

The principal should encourage parents and teachers to call and confirm meeting times and places. This will avoid unpleasant mixups that might hinder the good feelings and sense of accomplishment so important to the meeting.

The handbook should encourage parents to write down the questions they want to ask and arrive at the meeting equipped with paper and pen to write down responses. If the parent does not have a code of conduct or student handbook, the handbook should include where to obtain them.

✓ Topics concerning their student that parents should discuss with teachers include (in no particular order):

- The quality of the student's academic progress
- The behavior of the student
- The student's attitudes toward school, peers, and adults
- How much the student participates in class
- The kind of work habits the student has
- Cocurricular activities in which the student participates
- Special interests or talents that the student exhibits
- A sample of the student's work.

✓ Questions about how the teacher conducts class should include:

- What the expectations are for the class and how well the student is meeting them
- When and how report cards/test results are sent home
- The number of students in the class
- Homework policy
- Whether or not (and how often) the student has homework
- Grading and promotion policies
- The extent of computer usage in the class or in the school
- What the parent can do at home to help the student
- Policy about notifying the parent of problems or concerns
- The textbook(s) that the student uses
- The most convenient time to call the teacher for a progress report on the student
- The teacher's year-long goals
- The group the student is in (if the teacher groups students by ability) and why
- What special projects the students are working on.

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✓ Parents should be encouraged to discuss the student's home life with the teacher, including:

- Concerns about school that the student has shared at home
- Concerns at home that may affect their student's performance. Students are often reluctant to share home problems with a teacher, and parents can help identify a possible source of a student's performance problem.

The handbook should encourage parents to be on time for the appointment (to indicate that the parent is serious about the conference), listen carefully to the teacher, take notes when applicable, and feel free to request clarification about any response that might not be clear.

The handbook should emphasize the importance of maintaining a positive attitude—everyone is trying to work together to help the student improve.

If the conference is held in the student's classroom, parents should look around and get the "feel" of the room. Does it seem student-friendly? Is student work displayed? Is the room clean and attractive?

The handbook should also encourage parents to schedule meetings with their student's counselor and administrator(s), and it should include the most important questions that parents should ask counselors:

✓ **Standardized testing**
- What are the scheduled dates?
- When are results returned?
- Will someone be available to answer questions about the results?
- How can the parent help the student prepare for the test?

✓ **The student's permanent record**
- Parents may review the permanent record and ask questions on any part that is not clear to them.
- Parents should verify the accuracy of all vital information: name, address, telephone number(s), etc.

✓ **Academics**
- Who selects the student's course(s)?
- What can be done to improve the student's progress?
- What kind of curriculum will be offered in the coming year?

✓ **Counseling**
- Does the school counselor provide social, personal, behavioral, academic, and career counseling?
- What service(s) does the counselor provide?
- How can parents learn about coming guidance events?
- Does the school test for vision, hearing, speech, and learning disabilities? When?

✓ **Medical**
- When is the school nurse available?
- What procedures are in place for medical emergencies?
- What medicines are used and how they are dispensed?
- What medical policies, if any, does the school have?

✓ **The administration**
- Is the code of conduct/student handbook available?
- What are the policies about student dress, attendance, and tardiness?
- How can parents learn about school events—open house, report cards, registration, after-school activities, athletic tryouts, etc.?
- Will an administrator contact the parent if the student is having any problems?
- What times are most convenient to telephone the administrator?

The parent handbook should encourage parents to make sure that appropriate school personnel have the parents' and student's names, current address, and—extremely important—how the parent can be contacted (day *and* night) if there is a concern, a problem, or an emergency at school.

Perhaps most important, the handbook should emphasize that parents should not wait until there is a problem to contact teachers, counselors, or administrators. Positive parent-school contact is at least as important during good times as it is during less-than-good times.

The principal has a deep interest in every parent-teacher conference. A well–thought out handbook will help prepare parents and ensure that the conferences are indeed successful.

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